



Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac

A Critical History of Operations in Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania from the Commencement to the Close of the War, 1861-1865.

By WILLIAM SWINTON.

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SEVEN DAYS' RETREAT.

Battle of Gaines's Mill—McClellan's Indecision—Change of Base to the James.

The attitude of the army during the month succeeding the action of Fair Oaks was not improving. It was seemingly a body that had lost its momentum; and the troops, sweltering through all that hot month amid the unwholesome swamps of the Chickahominy, sank in energy. McClellan's position was a trying one. He realized the full necessity of action; but he also realized better than any of his contemporaries the enormous difficulty of the task laid upon him. Feeling deeply the need of new accessions to his strength, in order to permit him to carry out his plans, and seeing almost at large a force as he had to confront the enemy with scattered in unimpaired positions throughout Virginia, he was naturally urgent that they should be forwarded from where they were useless to where they might be so advantageously employed.

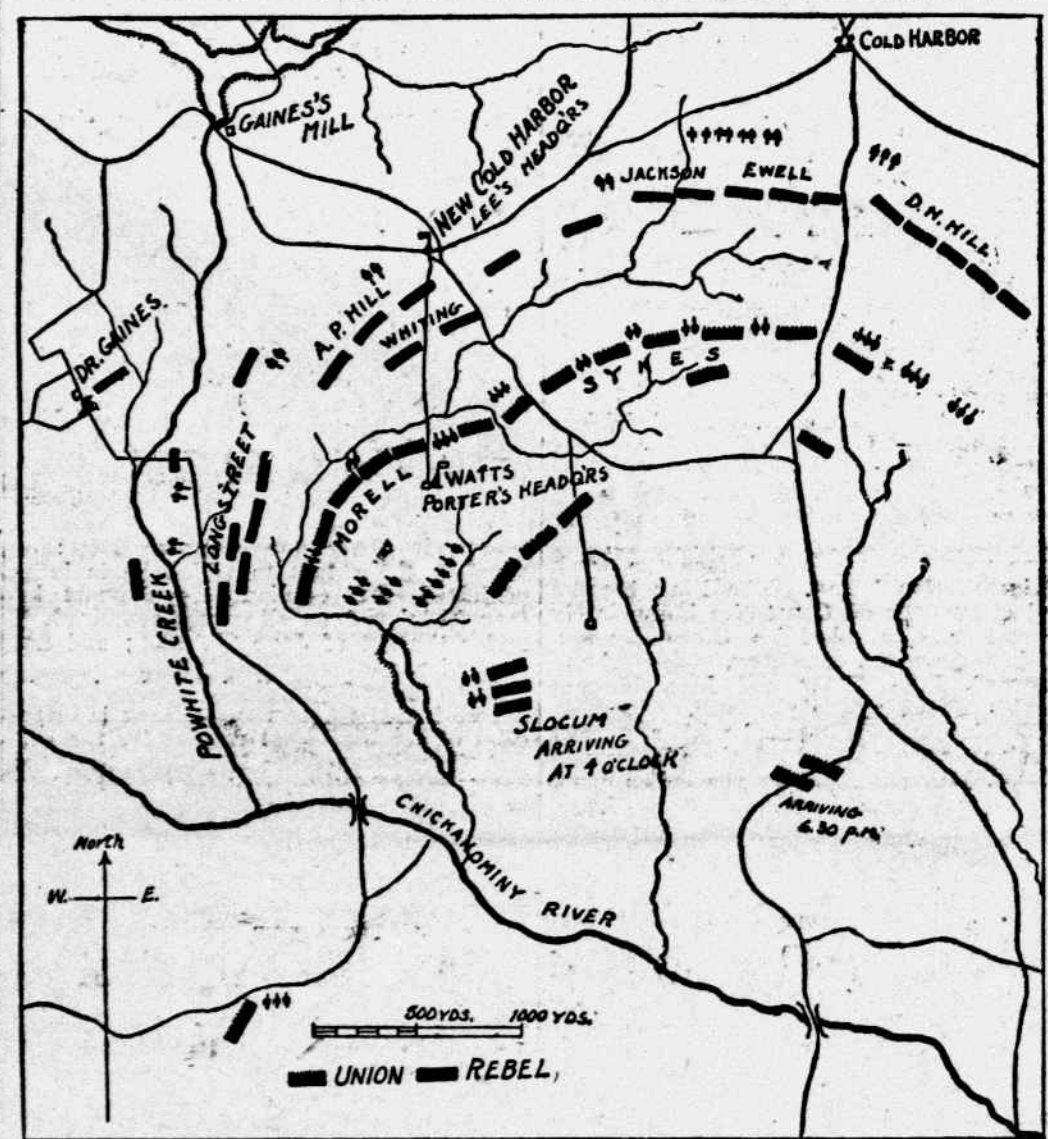
Yet the situation was not one that permitted inaction; for the position of the army astride the river, and the experience already had of the danger to which that division of its strength exposed it, should have been a sufficient admonition of the necessity of change. The fundamental vice was the direction of McClellan's line of communications almost on the prolongation of his front of operations. Pivoting on the York River Railroad, and drawing his supplies from White House, it became absolutely necessary for him to hold a large part of his effective strength on the left bank of the Chickahominy for the protection of that line—a situation that at once prevented his using his whole force, and exposed him to attack in detail. This false position might have been rectified in two ways: 1. By a change of base to the James, which would have given a line of maneuver against Richmond, entirely free from the objections inherent in that by the York, and where the movement would be either of moving against Richmond by the north bank of the James or, by a transfer to the south side, of operating against its communications, which was altogether the bolder and more decisive method; 2. By the transfer of the whole force to the right bank of the Chickahominy, abandoning the line of the York, and then making a prompt advance against Richmond, thus taking the advantage that, if unsuccessful in the battle against the adverse force, the line of the James might be taken up. The latter was the preferable course, as it avoided the ill moral effect that might be expected to attend a change of base without a battle. But either would have been better than inaction, which, in the actual situation, was more hazardous than the boldest procedure, and was an eminent example of that kind of false prudence that is often the greatest rashness.

McClellan waits for? Gen. McClellan knew that the adoption of the one course or the other was necessary; but unfortunately the case was not presenting an alternative, and it was the nature of that commander's mind to vacillate between conflicting views, to so let "I dare not wait upon I would," that he was apt to hesitate even in conjunctures when the wisest course was plain, and to do nothing. To whatever subtle cause, deep seated in the structure of his mind—to whatever excess of lymph in his blood this may have been due—it certainly marred his eminent capacity as a soldier. There is something painful and at the same time almost ludicrous in the evidence, found in his official dispatches, of this ever-abundant non-performance. On the day succeeding the action of Fair Oaks, the 24th of June, he wrote: "I only wait for the river to fall to cross with the army." On the 25th of June, he wrote: "I am ready to move forward and take Richmond the moment that McClellan reaches here, and the ground will admit the passage of artillery." McClellan's division (McDowell's force) arrived on the 12th and 13th, which increased his effective to 115,000 men. (1) On the 16th he wrote: "I hope two days more will make the ground practicable. I will advance as soon as the bridges are completed and the ground fit for artillery to move." On the 18th: "A general engagement may take place any hour." On the 25th: "The army will probably occur to-morrow, or within a short time"—and so on and on in the like tenor, until the time when the enemy cut short the endless debate by seizing the initiative. Now it can not be said that the obstacles indicated were not real difficulties in the way of an advance; that the successive conditions precedent of action were not well taken and based on sound military reasons. With Gen. McClellan should have seen, however, is that his proper course of action was determined not by these circumstances at all, but was dictated by the situation of exciting himself from a situation intrinsically false. This became only too soon manifest.

LEE SUCCEEDED JOHNSTON. When the hurt that Gen. Johnston had received at Fair Oaks was seen to be one that must long keep him out of the field, Gen. Robert E. Lee was nominated to succeed him in the command of the Army of Northern Virginia. Of this soldier, destined to so great a name, men had at this time to judge by promise rather than by proof. Gen. Lee's actual experience in the field had been confined to a trivial campaign in the mountains of Western Virginia, in which he had been in a remarkable manner foiled by Gen. Rosecrans; and this, with his reflective habits and cautious temper, promised a commander of the type of the "Old Reliable," in which one may more readily judge wrongly than in the attempt to prognosticate from the plane of everyday experience, the behavior of a man placed in command of an army. Lee, whose characteristic trait was caution, marked the commencement of his career by a stroke brilliant in its boldness.

JOHNSTON'S PLAN ADHERED TO. It has been seen that in Gen. Johnston's theory of action for the defense of Richmond, the Union line on the 24th, and stated that Jackson was moving from Gordonsville, along the line of the Virginia Central Railroad, to strike the right of the Army of the Potomac; but his story was not credited. 3. Lee: Reports of the Army of Northern Virginia, vol. i, p. 6. 4. The force here consisted of a regiment and a battery.

mond, he judged that the course best suited to the circumstances was to draw in around the Confederate Capital, concentrate there all the available resources of the South, and then fall with crushing weight upon the Union army, divided by the Chickahominy. Accidental circumstances had made the blow which he delivered ineffectual. Gen. Lee determined to continue the same line of action; and this he was enabled to carry out under most favorable auspices. Johnston's vision touching the necessity of a powerful gathering of force at Richmond fell comparatively unheeded; but his successor had better fortune, and having decided to assume the offensive, he was able to draw in the Confederate detachments scattered along the coast and throughout Virginia, and by this means raise his effective to near 100,000 men. Lee's policy of concentration included the withdrawal of Jackson's force from the Valley of the Shenandoah—and



THE FIELD AT GAINES'S MILL.

a withdrawal so secret, that its first announcement would be the shock of the block. Before commencing operations, however, he sent Stuart, with a body of 1,500 Virginia troopers, to make the circuit of the Union army, by a swoop around its rear. This having been successfully accomplished about the middle of June, Lee was ready, with the knowledge thus gained, to strike.

POOLING THE FEDERALS. To mask Jackson's intended withdrawal from the Valley, Gen. Lee detached a division from the force around Richmond (the division of Whiting) and sent it to join Jackson. This was done ostensibly, and in such a way that it should become known to Gen. McClellan. Lee judged that the intelligence of this movement would give his antagonist the impression of a revival of operations in the Shenandoah region. If there was, as seemed likely, a renewed intention of moving forward McDowell's army to join McClellan, a fresh appeal to the fears of the administration for the safety of Washington was the shrewdly chosen means of again diverting that force.

JACKSON STOLE A MARCH. When this had his intended effect, Jackson, with his whole command, now raised to about 25,000 men, was ordered to march rapidly and secretly in the direction of Richmond. He set out from the vicinity of Port Republic (where he had remained since the termination of the Valley campaign) on the 17th of June, and moving by way of Gordonsville and the line of the Virginia Central Railroad, pushed his advance so vigorously that on the 25th he struck Ashland, on the Fredericksburg Railroad, 12 miles from Richmond. With such skill did Jackson manage his march, that not Gen. McClellan, nor yet Banks, nor Fremont, nor McDowell, knew aught of it; and when, on the 25th, Jackson had reached Ashland, and was within striking distance of the right wing of the Army of the Potomac, McClellan, absorbed in his proposed operations on the Richmond side of the Chickahominy, was that very day advancing his pickets on the Williamsburg road, preparatory to a general forward movement in that direction. Jackson now reached a point where the other Confederate columns could begin the parts assigned to them.

Lee's plan contemplated that as soon as Jackson, by his maneuvers on the north bank of the Chickahominy, should have uncovered the passage of the stream at Meadow and Mechanicsville bridges, the divisions on the south bank should cross and join Jackson's column, when the whole army should sweep down the north side of the Chickahominy, toward the York River, by the route of the York River Railroad, and drive away the communications with White House. (3)

PORTER OBSTRUCTED HILL. The only interference with this plan was caused by a day's delay in Jackson's movement whereby it occurred that when, on the afternoon of the 26th, Gen. A. P. Hill, after crossing the Chickahominy at Meadow Bridge and driving away the small force (4) in observation at Mechanics-

ville (thus enabling the divisions of Longstreet and D. H. Hill to cross at Mechanicsville Bridge and join him), attempted to proceed in the movement down the north bank of the Chickahominy, the columns were brought to a halt by a part of the corps of Fitz-John Porter, which held an entrenched position on the left bank of Beaver Dam Creek, a small tributary of the Chickahominy. The position was a strong one, the left bank of the creek being high and almost perpendicular, and the approach being over open fields, swept by artillery fire and obstructed by abatis. This position was held by the brigades of Reynolds and Seymour; but when the Confederates showed a determination to force the passage, Gen. Porter called up the remainder of his corps, consisting of Meade's Brigade and the division of Morell. The Mechanicsville road, on which the Confederate divisions, under Gen. Longstreet, moved to make the passage of Beaver Dam Creek, turns when near the creek and runs nearly parallel to it, thus causing an advancing force to present a flank. The Federal troops were concealed by earthenworks commanding this road, and reserving their fire until the head of the Confederate column was nearly across the ravine, they opened a terribly destructive volley in the face and on the flank of the advancing force; the survivors fled, and no additional attempt was made to force the passage that night; but brisk firing was continued till 9 o'clock. (5) The enemy lost between 3,000 and 4,000 men, while the Union loss was quite inconsiderable. (6) The attempt was renewed at dawn of the following morning, with equally ill success; but while the Confederates were thus engaged, Jackson passed Beaver Dam Creek above and turned the position. By the night of the 26th of June, the intelligence which McClellan received from his outposts left no doubt of Jackson's approach, and dividing now the true nature of Lee's move, he resolved to withdraw his right wing, under Gen. Porter, from position at Beaver Dam, where it was too far from the main body and too much "in the air." The answer to the question, what should be done with the right wing, would determine the entire situation.

GRAND OPPORTUNITY LOST. The disclosure of Lee's bold initiative made action indispensable. Three courses were open to McClellan: 1. To effect a concentration of the whole army on the north side of the Chickahominy, and there deliver general battle. 2. To effect a concentration on the south bank, and march directly for Richmond. 3. To transfer the right wing to the south bank, and make a change of base to the James River. The first plan was not conformable to military principles; for Lee already laid hold of McClellan's communications with White House, and the Confederate force on the Richmond side of the Chickahominy imperilled his line of retreat to the James River. To have given general battle on the north bank would, therefore, have been to risk his army without an assured line of retreat. (7)

5. Porter: Report of Mechanicsville. This statement is fully borne out by Lee: "After sustaining a destructive fire of musketry and artillery, at short range, the reports of the Army of Northern Virginia, vol. i, p. 9.

6. I derive this statement of the heavy Confederate loss from Gen. Longstreet himself. It does not appear in the official reports, and is much larger than had hitherto been supposed.

7. This is something which even Napoleon was unwilling to do. Discussing the lines of conduct open to him after crossing the Alps into Italy, he says: "Of these three courses, the first—to march upon Turin—was contrary to the true principles of war, as the French would run the risk of fighting without having a certain rear. Fort Bard not being then taken, Gourgand and Montholon: Memoirs of Napoleon, vol. i, p. 270.

8. Gen. Magruder, who had command of the Confederate forces on the right bank of the Chickahominy, says: "I considered the situation of our army as extremely critical and perilous. The larger part of it was on the opposite side of the Chickahominy, the bridges had been all destroyed, but it was rebuilt, and there were but 25,000 men between Lee's—McClellan's—army of 100,000 men and Richmond." Reports of the Army of Northern Virginia, vol. i, p. 191.

crossings of the Chickahominy on the south bank, while the Confederate bridges were destroyed, and Lee would have been compelled to make a detour of at least a day, in the form of a frontal attack of Richmond. Why, therefore, did not Gen. McClellan execute this operation? He answers this question by a reference to the limited quantity of supplies on hand; but this cannot be accepted as a valid reason, for the army had at this time rations for many days, and large stores had eventually to be burnt previous to the retreat. The real reason is, that the operation overlooked by its boldness the methodical genius of the Union commander.

TO THE JAMES. It resulted, therefore, that he adopted the alternative of a change of base to the James River. In deciding upon this plan, which was judicious if not brilliant, and which was executed in a manner to reflect high credit on the army and its commander, the only sacrifice made by Gen. McClellan—and indeed it was no inconsiderable one—was that he did on compulsion what he might have done before from choice—what, indeed, he appears to have intended to do—what, but for his error, General so often did in the perilous half-way-house between the offensive and the defensive, never was done; thus turning away the current of an enterprise of great pith and moment and losing the name of action.

PORTER WAS INTERPOSED. In determining to withdraw Porter's Corps to the south bank of the Chickahominy and effect with his limited army a change of base to the James River, Gen. McClellan took a preliminary step which, though seemingly dictated by the necessities of his difficult situation, enabled the Confederates to inflict a heavy blow on that corps, and beclouded the commencement of the retrograde movement by a severe disaster to the Union army. It appeared that an immediate withdrawal of the right wing over the Chickahominy after Jackson had turned its position on Beaver Dam Creek would expose the rear of the army, placed as between two fires, (8) and enable Jackson by moving direct on the lower bridges of the Chickahominy, and even on Malvern Hill, to interrupt the movement to the James River. He resolved, therefore, to engage Jackson with Porter's Corps, and to leave whatever troops might be available from the south bank of the Chickahominy in order to cover the withdrawal of the trains and heavy guns and to gain time for arrangements looking to the change of base to the James. It was a desperate and unhappy plight in which the commander found himself placed—condemned either to hazard the safety of his whole army, or doom a portion of it to almost assured destruction. For was not Porter's Corps, with Jackson alone that Porter would have to deal, but with more than two-thirds of the entire Confederate army, with Jackson and Longstreet and the First Corps, a force of 30,000 men—an overwhelming of opposition that lent to the task assigned to Porter almost the character of a forlorn hope.

In execution of this design, the greater part of the trains and heavy weapons were removed from Beaver Dam to the south bank of the Chickahominy during the night of the 26th; and shortly before daylight the delicate operation of withdrawing the troops was begun. The position where it was determined to make the new stand, was commenced and skillfully and successfully executed; for, though the Confederates followed closely, skirmishing, yet Porter was able to hold up his new position before they appeared in force in his front. The rear was handsomely covered by Seymour's Brigade and the horse batteries of Robertson and Tidball.

POSITIONS OF PORTER'S FORCES. The position on the north bank of the Chickahominy taken up for resistance, was well chosen, on a range of heights between Cold Harbor and the Chickahominy. The line of battle formed the arc of a circle, covering the approaches to the bridges which connected the right wing with the troops on the south side of the stream. The left (Morell's) Division rested on a wooded bluff, which rose abruptly from a deep ravine leading down to the Chickahominy; the right (Sykes's Division of Regulars) posted in woods and clearing, extended to the rear of Cold Harbor. The ground, generally open in front, was bounded on the side of the Confederate approach by a wood with dense and tangled undergrowth and traversed by a sluggish stream. McClellan's Division was formed in a second line. (10) This field was destined to a historic character; for two years afterwards, Gen. Grant, in his campaign from the Rapidan to Richmond, delivered a bloody battle on the same ground. Yet between the circumstances of the two battles, there was one point of difference; and it is a point of difference that epitomizes the whole progress of the war from 1862 to 1864. By the time Lee found himself on the defensive along the Chickahominy, a long experience had taught the enormous advantage of those rude breastworks of logs and earth, which the troops of both armies had acquired skill in constructing. But in the earlier action the art of preparing defensive positions was yet in its infancy, and the ground on which Porter disposed his force in a position that in two hours' vigorous use of the ax and spade might have been rendered impregnable—remained guarded by little more than the naked valor of the troops.

PORTER ATTACKED BY TWO TO ONE. The dispositions had hardly been made, when at 2 o'clock Gen. A. P. Hill, who had been ordered to move forward from round by New Cold Harbor, and advanced his division to the attack. Jackson, who was to form the left of the Confederate line, had not yet come up, and Longstreet was held back until Jackson arrived on the left should compel an extension of the Federal line. Hill, accordingly, attacked alone; but he gained no advantage, for after piercing the line at one point, he was repulsed and forced to yield ground, his troops being driven back in great disorder and with heavy loss. (11) To relieve Hill, the Confederate commander now ordered Longstreet, who held the right of the Confederate line, to make a feint on the left of the Union position; but Longstreet soon discovered that, owing to the strength of this point, the feint to be effective would have to be converted into

8. McClellan: Report, p. 125. 9. Reynolds's Brigade was posted on the extreme right to cover the approaches from Cold Harbor and Dispatch Station to the James River.

10. Even a stronger statement than that above made would be justified by the Confederate official reports. Thus Gen. Whiting says: "Men were leaving the field in every direction and in great disorder; two regiments, one from South Carolina and one from Louisiana, were actually marching back from the fire. Men were skulking from the front in a shameful manner." Reports of the Army of Northern Virginia, vol. i, p. 184. Gen. Lee explains this by the statement that "most of these men had never been under fire till the day before (24th, p. 8). This furnishes an additional proof that Lee had been re-enforced by troops from the coast.

(Continued on sixth page.)



Short Histories of Notable Regiments

By COL. WM. F. FOX.

FIRST MINNESOTA INFANTRY.

HARROW'S BRIGADE—GIBBON'S DIVISION—SECOND CORPS.

(1) COL. WILLIS A. GORMAN: BRIG.-GEN.
(2) COL. NAPOLEON J. DANA; MAJOR-GEN.
(3) COL. ALFRED SULLY; MAJOR-GEN.
(4) COL. GEORGE N. MORGAN.

(5) COL. WILLIAM COLVILLE, JR.; BVT. BRIG.-GEN.
(6) COL. CHARLES P. ADAMS; BVT. BRIG.-GEN.
(7) COL. MARK W. DOWDIE.

COMPANIES.	KILLED AND DIED OF WOUNDS.			DIED OF DISEASE, ACCIDENTS, IN PRISON, &c.			Total Enrollment.
	Officers.	Men.	Total.	Officers.	Men.	Total.	
Field and Staff .....	..	..	..	..	..	..	21
Company A	1	20	21	1	5	6	113
B .....	..	11	11	..	5	5	108
C	1	28	29	1	11	12	134
D	1	13	14	..	6	6	128
E .....	..	10	10	..	6	6	120
F .....	..	16	16	..	7	7	124
G	2	11	13	..	12	12	120
H .....	..	13	13	..	6	6	123
I	1	17	18	..	8	8	127
K	2	17	19	..	4	4	124
Veteran A .....	..	11	11	New Battalion.	27	27	...
Veteran B .....	..	10	10	..	..	..	..
Totals	10	177	187	2	97	99	1,242

Total of killed and wounded, 585; missing and captured, 196; died in Confederate prisons (previously included), 13. 187 killed—15 per cent.

BATTLES.	K. & M. W.	BATTLES.	K. & M. W.
First Bull Run, Va., Oct. 22, 1861	48	Fredericksburg, Va., Dec. 13, 1862	1
Pickett, Va., Oct. 22, 1861	1	Gettysburg, Pa., July 1, 1863	75
Goose Creek, Va., Oct. 22, 1861	1	Bristoe Station, Va., Nov. 10, 1863	2
Fair Oaks, Va., May 31, 1862	2	Petersburg, Va. (assault, 1864)	3
Pickett, Va., June 1, 1862	1	Jerusalem Road, Va., June 3, 1864	4
Savage Station, Va., June 9, 1862	10	Siege of Petersburg, Va., Sept. 2, 1864	5
Gleendale, Va., June 11, 1862	1	Deep Bottom, Va., Sept. 7, 1864	5
Flint Hill, Va., Sept. 1, 1862	1	Ream's Station, Va., Sept. 12, 1864	2
Vienna, Va., Sept. 2, 1862	4	Boydton Road, Va., Sept. 1, 1864	1
Antietam, Md., Sept. 17, 1862	20		

Present, also, at Yorktown; West Point; Peach Orchard; Malvern Hill; Second Fredericksburg; Mine Run; Strawberry Plains; Hatcher's Run; Farmville; Appomattox.

NOTES.—The greatest regimental loss in any battle, in proportion to the number engaged, occurred in the ranks of the First Minnesota, at Gettysburg. In that battle, on the afternoon of the second day, the Confederates had broken through Sickles's ranks, and were about seizing an important position within the Union lines. The only body of troops at hand was the First Minnesota. Hancock, desiring to impede the enemy's advance until reinforcements could be brought up, ordered Colville to charge the advancing Confederate brigade with his regiment. Alone and unsupported, it attacked them, drove them back, and captured their colors. But it was accomplished at a terrible cost; of the eight companies engaged—262 all told—215 were killed and wounded. It is the largest percentage of loss recorded in the annals of modern warfare. It was in action again on the following day, its casualties at Gettysburg aggregating 51 killed, and 173 wounded; total, 224. This regiment was organized April 29, 1861, and was the first in the Union Army to be mustered in for three years. It fought at First Bull Run—then in Franklin's Brigade, Heintzelman's Division. Its casualties on that field were 42 killed, 108 wounded, and 30 missing, the largest loss sustained by any regiment there. It was assigned, soon after, to the First Brigade, Second Division, Second Corps, in which it remained during its service.

TWELFTH MASSACHUSETTS INFANTRY.

BAXTER'S BRIGADE—ROBINSON'S DIVISION—FIRST CORPS.

(1) COL. FLETCHER WEBSTER (Killed).

(2) COL. JAMES L. BATES.

COMPANIES.	KILLED AND DIED OF WOUNDS.			DIED OF DISEASE, ACCIDENTS, IN PRISON, &c.			Total Enrollment.
	Officers.	Men.	Total.	Officers.	Men.	Total.	
Field and Staff	4	..	4	..	..	..	17
Company A	3	21	24	..	11	11	159
B	1	21	22	..	8	8	136
C	1	15	16	..	11	11	159
D	2	16	18	..	6	6	141
E .....	..	24	24	..	4	4	132
F	1	17	18	..	10	10	158
G	2	19	21	..	6	6	146
H	2	11	13	..	11	11	157
I .....	..	18	18	..	8	8	158
K .....	..	13	13	..	8	8	159
Totals	18	175	193	..	83	83	1,522

193 killed—12.6 per cent. Original enrollment, 1,040; killed, 152; percentage, 14.6. Total loss in killed and wounded, 667; Died of disease in Confederate prisons, 33.

BATTLES.	K. & M. W.	BATTLES.	K. & M. W.
Cedar Mountain, Va., May 3, 1862	2	Funkstown, Md., June 11, 1862	1
Thoroughfare Gap, Va., May 21, 1862	1	Wilderness, Va., May 31, 1862	21
Manassas, Va., Aug. 26, 1862	22	Spotsylvania, Va., June 3, 1863	20
South Mountain, Va., Sept. 14, 1862	1	North Anna, Va., June 26, 1863	5
Antietam, Md., Sept. 17, 1862	74	Bethesda Church, Va., June 30, 1863	3
Fredericksburg, Va., Dec. 13, 1862	24	Petersburg, Va., June 30, 1863	7
Gettysburg, Pa., July 1, 1863	12		

Present, also, at Chancellorsville; Mine Run; Totopotomoy; Cold Harbor.

NOTES.—The regiment left Boston July 23, 1861. It was stationed on the Maryland side of the Upper Potomac, and made its winter-quarters at Frederick, Md. It commenced active service in April, 1862, in the Shenandoah Valley, then in Hartsuff's (3d) Brigade, Ricketts's (2d) Division, McDowell's Corps. While in this campaign it was engaged at Manassas, where its losses amounted to 13 killed, 61 wounded, and 63 missing; Colonel Webster, a son of Daniel Webster, was killed there. The regiment faced a terrible fire at Antietam, losing 49 killed, 165 wounded, and 10 missing, out of 334 present on the field; Major Elisha Burbank was mortally wounded in that battle. At Fredericksburg, the regiment was in Lyle's (2d) Brigade, Gibbon's (2d) Division, First Corps; its casualties in that fight were 14 killed, 86 wounded, and 4 missing, out of 258 engaged. General Baxter commanded the brigade at Gettysburg, and Robinson the division—the regiment losing there 5 killed, 52 wounded, and 62 missing, out of about 200 in line. The division was transferred, in 1864, to the Fifth Corps. At the Wilderness, Lieutenant-Colonel David Allen, Jr., was killed, the loss of the Twelfth amounting to 14 killed, 48 wounded, and 8 missing. Its losses in 1864, from May 5th to June 25th—when it was mustered out—were 42 killed, 124 wounded, and 10 missing. It left the front June 25, 1864; the recruits and reenlisted men remaining in the field were transferred to the Thirty-ninth Massachusetts.

EDITORIAL NOTE: The above pages are reproduced from Col. Fox's famous book, "Regimental Losses." Other pages, giving short histories of notable regiments, will appear from week to week. It is hoped the appearance of these short histories will stimulate comrades to send in material for the preparation of more complete histories of their respective regiments than have yet appeared.